

The Cultural Survivals of Kurru People Gleaned from the Ritual Re-enactment of ‘Kuravar Padukalam’

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ABSTRACT

In Connection with the ritual observance of *Valli Kalyaanam*, the (Celestial) marriage of *Valli* (, the adopted daughter of ‘*Kuravar* Chieftain’ Nambirajan) with Lord Muruga, the ritual re-enactment of ‘*Kuravar Padukalam*’ (Lit. “Martyrdom of ‘*Kuravar* People”) has been observed annually by the ‘*Kurru* People’ during ‘*Panguni*’ (i.e., March-April) at the backside of temple premises of Lord Muruga of Velimalai located at Kumarakovil in the Thuckalay – Thiruvananthapuram road of Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu (Henceforth will be referred to simply as ‘Kumarakovil’)

Certain corollary cultural observances such as ‘*Kora Kanji Voothradhu*’ (Lit. “Distribution of rice gruel by the ‘*Kurru* People”), ‘*Kaavadi Kettu*’ (& ‘*Alagu Kuthradhu*’) (Lit. “Shouldering the Pole-bearing structure” & (Lit. “Piercing of (body-parts) with sharp hooks, etc.”) on the previous day to the ritual re-enactment of ‘*Kuravar Padukalam*’, ‘*Pallakku Alangarikradhu*’ (Lit. “Decoration of palanquins”) on the day of conduct of ‘*Kuravar Padukalam*’ were adhered in the vicinity of Kumarkovil temple.

In this paper, an attempt is made to study and document ‘*Kuravar Padukalam*’, the main cultural observance along with the above mentioned corollary cultural observances that are taking place prior to the conduct of ‘*Valli Kalyaanam*’ at the Velimalai Murugan Temple of Kumarakovil. And the cultural survivals gleaned out of these cultural observances are being utilized in tracing the ethnohistory of ‘*Kurru* People’ at large.

KEYWORDS: *Cultural Survivals – Ritual re-enactment – Cultural Observances – Ethnohistory – Oral narratives – Folk ballad – ‘Kurru People’ / ‘Kuravar People – Hereditary rights*

I. On Introducing the Cultural Concepts of ‘Cultural Survivals’ & ‘Ethnohistory’:-

It becomes an obligatory pre-requisite to know and understand certain concepts, say ‘Cultural Survivals’, ‘Ethnohistory’ before venturing into the study of cultural observance ‘*Kuravar Padukalam*’ which is re-enacted annually by the ‘*Kuravar*’ / ‘*Kurru* People’¹ at the vicinity of Velimalai temple of Kumarakovil where the presiding deity is Lord Muruga.

According to E.B. Tylor, the term ‘Cultural Survivals’ / ‘Survivals’ refers to certain culture traits which survive till date as the ‘relic’ in the culture complex and thereby indicate the ‘Cultural Continuity’ of past in the present scenario.²

And the term ‘Ethnohistory’ signifies the anthropological approach of tracing the history of an indigenous ethnic group, in the absence of proper historical documents, but with the available rudimentary cultural evidences drawn from cultural observances, linguistic expressions, oral narratives, tangible relics of culture, travelogues, diaries, old letters.³

II. Kumarakovil: The Locale & The Temple:-

‘Kumarakovil’ is a temple dedicated to Lord Muruga and it is located at the foothill of ‘Velimalai’, on the southern tip of Indian subcontinent, 15 kms enroute to Thiruvananthapuram, bordering the town of Padmanabhapuram. Consequently, the locale itself is also named after as ‘Kumarakovil’.

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Set in the scenic surrounding, the temple of Kumarakovil is renowned among all the Murugan temples in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu State. It is interesting to note that the Tamil epic Silappathikaram mentions this temple as '*Chaera Naattu Aeragam*' (Lit. "The Eragam of Chera country") And this temple is accessed through a flight of 40 steep steps. Here, Lord Muruga is sculpted as a monolithic sculpture of 8'8" in height while the goddess *Valli* is depicted as a monolithic sculpture of 6'6" tall. '*Kalyana Vinayagar*' who was believed, as per the mythological tale, have helped his younger brother Lord Muruga to woo and marry *Valli* ultimately is located in the right side entrance of the temple in the inner circumbulatory path. The sacred tree of this temple is a venerated '*Vaengay Maram*' (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) of more than a century old.⁴ A cavern structure identified nearby known as '*Valli Kuhay*' (Lit. "Valli's Cave") is located on the hill top which is 2 Kms off the main temple. Other structures such as '*Valli Sunay*', a perennial water hole, '*Valli Saolay*', the millet field believed to be guarded by *Valli* and *Kizhavan Saolay*, another millet field where Lord Muruga was believed to come in the disguise of an old man to woo *Valli* are also identified here.⁵

III. Kumarakovil: As the Venue of Celestial Marriage of Valli-Murugan:-

At Kumarakovil the celestial marriage of *Valli* with Lord Muruga is celebrated with great fervor in the Tamil month of '*Panguni*' (i.e., March-April) having attended by thousands of devotees all over the State of Tamil Nadu as well as the adjoining Kerala State.

'*Kuravar Padukalam*', the martyrdom of '*Kuravar People*' while raging war against Lord Muruga, in line with the mythological tale associated with the divine marriage of *Valli* with Lord Muruga has been enacted colourfully during the moment popularly known as '*Valli Kalyaanam*'.

It is interesting to note that a folk ballad entitled, "*Kumarakaovil Valli Murugan Kalyaanam* which was prevailing in that area was also gets recorded in an 'emic study' of 'Ethnographic Study of *Kuravar Community*'.⁶

On the day of observance of celestial marriage, the presiding deity of Lord Muruga as '*Manavaala Kumaran*' seated in a palanquin, proceeds towards '*Thirukkalyaana Mandapam*' (Lit. "Marriage Hall") known popularly as '*Valli Mandapam*' (Lit. "Valli's Hall") which is located at a distance of 2 Kms from the main temple. After solemnizing the 'informal marriage',⁷ that took place at this marriage hall, the bride *Valli* is seen following his consort Lord Muruga, in another palanquin. Presently, these palanquins are getting embellished with floral

decoration by the local priests themselves. On seeing the married couple the sons of *Valli*'s adopted father get enraged and engage in a war with Lord Muruga till both the warring groups reach the back side of temple premises. Here the battlefield ends as the entire troop of *Kuravar* met with their end by the prowess of Lord Muruga. And that is why, this ritual re-enactment is referred to meaningfully as '*Kuravar Padukalam*'. For this re-enactment, the people of '*Kurru community*' dress themselves as the 'traditional' *Malai Kuravar* (Lit. "Hill dwelling *Kuravar*") with appropriate dress, make-up and other requisite props (such as 'bow & arrows', 'slings', 'wooden poles').

IV. 'Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam' at Kumarakovil: As the 'Pivotal Centre' for the conduct of Various Cultural Observances:-

At the entry point of 'Kumarakovil Junction' (, the bus stand), there exists '*Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam*', a 'Community Hall' for *Kuravan People* of several centuries old: This is claimed to be owned and maintained by five brothers of '*Kurru Community*'.⁸ At present, one Mr. S. Udhayakumar is the sole survivor of those five brothers. Mr. Udhayakumar (, with the assistance of his elder brother's son one Mr. Kannan) somehow manages to maintain this 'Community shelter' during the festive occasion. And this '*Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam*' remains and functions as the 'Pivotal Centre' for conducting various cultural observances related to the principal cultural observance of '*Kuravar Padukalam*', the subject – matter of this paper.

To cite a few, this community shelter not only serves as the platform for the conduct of corollary cultural observances (mentioned elsewhere), namely, '*Kora Kanji Voothradhu*', '*Kaavadi Kettu*' (& '*Alagu Kuthradhu*') but also as the 'reception hall' to receive the visiting devotees (from all over Tamil Nadu and Kerala), 'kitchen-cum-distribution centre' of '*Kora Kanji*' to the visiting devotees,; 'store house of make-up & other allied props to the '*Kurru troops*' who engage in the re-enactment of '*Kuravar Padukalam*'.

4.1. Vow fulfilling Cultural Observance of 'Kaavadi Kettu' & 'Alagu Kuthradhu':

On the previous day to the cultural observance of '*Kuravar Padukalam*' during evening the devotees (cutting across age & sex) from different parts of Kerala came and conglomerate at the back side of Kumarakovil temple premises. And these devotees, having accompanied by their kindreds, started bearing bedecked '*Kaavadi*' and this is referred to as '*Kaavadi Kettu*'; whereas a section of them engage in getting their body-parts (such as checks, lips, ribs)

pierced with sharp edged hooks, spears, tridents, etc., known as '*Alagu*'; such a ritual observance is designated as '*Alagu Kuthradhu*'. While going round the outer circumbulatory path of temple the whole group of devotees from Kerala start their procession to the accompaniment of beating of percussion instruments.

The devotees who bear '*Kavadi*' and '*Alagu*' also dance to the musical beats. On their way as and when they reach the '*Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam*', they pay their reverence to it; The '*Kurru People*' in turn offer ritual bath (to subdue the body heat) and drinking water (to quench the thirst) of the devotees) as a token of their reverence. On reaching the starting point, viz., the backside of temple premises, the devotees remove their '*Kaavadi*' and '*Alagu*' that they were bearing so far and resume their normal composure.

It is interesting to know that these devotees and their kindreds from Kerala are said to be the original inhabitants of Kumarakovil before migrating from therein to various parts of Kerala (such as Palghat, Pathamthitta)⁹.

4.2. Preparation & Distribution of '*Kora Kanji*':

On the late evening of previous day of observance of '*Kuravar Padukalam*', the '*Kurru People*' associated with '*Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam*' engage themselves in the preparatory stage of cooking '*Kora kanji*' by cleaning the rice grains and cutting the requisite vegetables (along with the preparation of '*Yeri Saeri*') (Lit. "Pumpkin sauce"). And the rice gruel and the Pumpkin sauce cooked in the early morning of next day are offered to the visiting devotees. The interesting aspect of this cultural observance is that even the elite people who came by cars are observed to receive their share of rice gruel and pumpkin sauce in their own utensils. And it is believed that partaking of these food items ensure health, by warding off ailments and diseases.

V. Ritual Re-enactment of '*Kuravar Padukalam*' at Kumarakovil: As the Cultural Observance of '*Kurru People*':-

The '*Kurru People*' who observe the ritual re-enactment of '*Kuravar Padukalam*' at Kumarakovil are referred to as '*Naanjil Naattu Kuravar*' (Lit. "*Kurru People of Nanjil Nadu*", the erstwhile name for Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu). As mentioned earlier, one Mr. S. Udhayakumar (,once a native of Kumarakovil) residing presently at 'Thingal Sandhay' organizes the entire re-enactment of '*Kuravar Padukalam*' (,apart from preparation and distribution of '*Kora Kanji*'). One Mr. Kannan, (son of Mr. Udhayakumar's deceased elder brother) assists him in all these endeavours.¹⁰

Mr. Udhayakumar not only procures and stores the props such as 'bow-arrows', 'slings', 'Poles' but also hires the traditional attires of *Kuravar* (, indigenous hill dwellers) and that of the mythological characters such as Shiva, Parvati, Vinayaka, Muruga, Naradha as well as '*Kuravar Samudhaaya Madam*' of Kumarakovil; and he also arranges for the make-up man in order to re-create the legendary characters out of the '*Kurru People*'. As and when the celestial couple '*Valli-Murugan*' proceeds towards the main temple from '*Valli Mandapam*' the troop in full make-up with props as '*Kuravar*' confronts with Lord Muruga and his troop and wages war against them. This battle continues till the procession reaches the backside of main temple. At this place, at one point of time, the battle ends with the ultimate martyrdom of all '*Kuravar People*', by the prowess of Lord Muruga, thereby fetching 'it' the name '*Kuravar Padukalam*' (Lit. "Death bed of *Kuravar*"). Lord Muruga, on the request of his spouse *Valli*, resurrects all the *Kurru People*; Consequently, the celestial marriage of *Valli-Murugan* is getting solemnized inside the premises of temple in front of the sanctum sanctorum.

The auspicious ending of '*Valli Kalyaanam*' is marked with the distribution of '*Thaen-Thinay Maavu*' (Lit. "Honey & Millet flour") as '*Prasaadham*' (Lit. "Ritual food") to the devotees gathered therein.

VI. Certain Inferences drawn out of the Study of Cultural Observance of '*Kuravar Padukalam*':-

The following inferences were drawn out by the way of studying the cultural observance of '*Kuravar Padukalam*':

- '*Kora Kanji Voothradhu*', the rice gruel distribution by the '*Kuravar People*' and the reverence shown towards 'it' by the local people and the visiting devotees vouch for the high regard shown to the then indigenous people, namely, the '*Kurru People*' despite their displacement from the soil of Kumarakovil several centuries ago.
- The devotees who observe '*Kaavadi Kettu*' (& '*Alagu Kuthradhu*') as the vow fulfilling observances (having come from different parts of Kerala) were the original inhabitants (& their descendants) who get displaced from Kumarakovil several centuries ago.
- The Marriage dress and the marriage badge (with string) which were once given inside the temple premises by the '*Kuravar People*' are presently handed over to the temple priests at '*Valli Mandapam*' itself.

- Likewise, the hereditary rights vested with the 'Kuravar People' for decorating the Palanquin(s) for the celestial couple (, viz., *Valli-Murugan*) are handled, now-a-days, by the contractors due to the intervention of caste groups such as Krishnavagay, Nayar.
- The 'Kurru People' belonging to the legacy of 'Naanjil Nattu Kuravar' make use of the observance of re-enactment of 'Kuravar Padukalam' (as part of the observance of 'Valli Kalyaanam' as to reckon their cultural past, namely, their erstwhile association with Kumarakovil; And the 'Kuravar Samudhaaya Madam' which exists till date excels as the 'clinching evidence', vouching for the cultural history of Kuraar People'.

VII. Certain Conjectures postulated in this Present Paper:-

Besides the inferences arrived at while studying the re-enactment of 'Kuravar Padukalam', certain conjectures are also postulated by the author of this paper. They are:

- The (practice of preparation and) distribution of rice gruel (, along with pumpkin sauce) by the 'Kurru People' on the morning of day of conducting of 'Valli Kalyaanam' might have been copied by the temple authorities of Velimalai of Kumarakovil, culminating into the practice of offering of rice gruel to the devotees once in a week; And the belief associated with the rice gruel as the bonanza of remedies to all sorts of ailments and chronic diseases might have been born out of the original practice of serving the gruel with added medicinal properties by the 'Kuravar People' on those days.¹¹
- The devotees who came from Kerala, indulging in the vow fulfilling ritual observances of 'Kaavadi Kettu' (and 'Alagu Kuthradhu') on the night of previous day of conduct of 'Valli Kalyaanam' might have been the 'Kurru People' belonging to the 'Kaavadi Clan' who were vested with the traditional right of performing 'Kaavadi Kettu' to Lord Muruga; Similarly, it is also presumed that the people who have been the 'Kuravar People' belonging to the 'Maenappaadi Clan'.
- As the 'Kuravar People' who performed the cultural observance are not invited inside the temple premises during solemnizing of formal marriage of *Valli-Murugan*, their traditional right of offering the marriage dress and the marriage badge (with string) during the marriage ceremony might have been restricted, at present, at the 'Valli Mandapam' itself.

VIII. Conclusion:-

The cultural observance of 'Padukalam' (Lit. "Death bed" / Martyrdom") has also attested in the field of 'Cultural Studies' of Tamil Nadu in association with other cultural domains say, for instance, 'Annanmaarsaami Padukalam' (in Western Tamil Nadu), 'Thuriyaodhanan Padukalam' (in Northern Tamil Nadu).

It is interesting to note that although the celestial marriage of Lord Muruga with *Valli* (, adopted daughter of Nambirajan, the 'Kuravar Chieftain') is observed as 'Valli Kalyaanam' in almost all the temples of Lord Muruga at Tamil Nadu, it is only at Kumarakovil the ritual re-enactment of 'Kuravar Padukalam' is observed in association with 'Valli-Murugan Kalyaanam'.

Through the study and documentation of the cultural observance 'Kuravar Padukalam', it is asserted firmly, we could trace certain clinching evidences for reconstructing the ethnohistory of 'Kurru People' of this area (i.e., the Kanyakumari district – the erstwhile 'Naanjil Naadu'). The continuous fervor shown by the local people towards the 'Kuravar People' for the cultural observances such as 'Kora Kanji Voothradhu', 'Kaavadi Kettu' (& 'Alagu Kuthradhu') observed with reference to 'Valli Kalyaanam' vouch for the antiquity and pride of 'Naanjil Kuravar' (, the 'Kurru People of erstwhile 'Naanjil Naadu'). However, we should bear in mind that the admixture of 'Alien Tradition' (from Hinduism) with the 'Native Tradition' of (indigenous) 'Kuravar People' poses a problem in tracing the ethnohistory of the latter, at case.

However, the reason for the displacement of 'Kuravar People' the original inhabitants of Kumarakovil still remains as a mystery; And their disintegration and consequent re-settlement into new habitats such as 'Thingal Sandhay', 'Thucklay', 'Kulasekaram', 'Aralvaymozhi' is attributed due to the forced migration imposed on them by the latter settlers from the plains.

Till date, a single household belonging to the lone sister of these five brothers who owned and maintained the 'Kuravar Samudhaaya Madam' alone resides at Kumarakovil; And this single household is looking after their traditional community shelter on the remaining period of the year, awaiting eagerly the cultural observance of re-enactment of 'Kuravar Padukalam' in association with the conduct of 'Valli Kalyaanam' in the coming up year (s).

Foot Notes

1. In this paper, the phrases 'Kuravar People' and 'Kurru People' are used interchangeably. And it should be bear in mind that the term 'Kuravar' is the exonym while the other term 'Kurru' is the endonym of one and the same ethnos, namely, the 'indigenous people of hilly terrain' (which is referred to as a traditional eco-zone of Ancient Tamils, 'Kurinji').
2. For details Cf. Maheswaran, C. 1987.
3. For further details Cf. Maheswaran, C. 1980.
4. The truncated 'Vaengay Maram' Kept reverentially in a separate shelter within the temple premises is venerated by the visiting devotees; And as per the mythological narratives, this is said o be the 'alternate form' taken by Lord Muruga on the intrusion of sons of Nambirajan while he was wooing Valli.
5. A folktale prevalent among the 'Kurru People' records that as the instruding 'Vaengay Maram' was felled down and pruned without any branches, Lord Muruga (who assumed the shape of that tree) in turn cursed the 'Kuravar' that their lineage will also be gets disintegrated without recognizable branches.
6. A total of 7 saolays(s) (i.e., ,millet field(s)) are said to be identified in and around the 'Valli Sunay'.
7. For details Cf. Pannerselvam, Mani Go. 2009.
8. The marriage of Valli with Lord Muruga is said to have taken placed in two phases(as practised by the Ancient Tamils), viz., 'Kalavu Manam' (i.e., "Marriage by mutual consent") and 'Karpu Manam' (i.e. "Solomnzing 'it' as a formal marriage")
9. According to the oral narratives of local people of Kumarakovil, this 'Kuravan Samudhaya Madam' is in existence since 300 years before present. But the author of this paper presumes that this cultural monument might have been in vogue for more than 300 years (and probably gets renovated three centuries ago).
10. The mutual reverence shown by the 'visiting devotees' from different parts of Kerala and the 'maintainers' with reference to this 'Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam' vouch for a sort of 'Cultural Continuity' that exists till date.
11. It is heartening to note that Mr. S. Udhayakumar who maintains the traditional 'Kuravan Samudhaaya Madam' and organizes the cultural observance of 'Kuravar Padukalam' uttered emotionally that Mr. Kannan (who is the son of

his deceased elder brother), hailing from Thuckalay will be his successor in carrying out the continuity of all these cultural observances. And the author of this paper was able to observe and assess the involvement and the dedication of the latter to the inculcation of the former.

12. At present, though the 'Kurru People' are not in the practice of adding any medicinal ingredients into the rice gruel (and or the pumpkin sauce) while cooking and or serving them to the visiting public, it is construed to cure very many ailments and diseases.

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Colophon:

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